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Regulating Precarious Employment: The case of young Australian retail workers

Young workers are highly susceptible to the precarities of external labour markets. They are more likely to be employed in precarious, part-time and insecure work and to lose their jobs in an economic downturn. For young people, the process of transitioning between education and employment includes periods in and out of further education and in and out of employment, and in underemployment. The underemployment of youth is the global norm (Roberts 2009). The policy orthodoxy in industrialised nations normalises these transitions as 'natural' and as a 'stage' through which young people must pass. Here, the state plays a vital role in providing both welfare support and regulatory protection for young people in precarious work and transitioning from it.

The national regulatory context sets acceptable employment practices within the labour market and thereby plays a central role in establishing power relations and resource allocation between the parties (Ostermann 2009). We use Australia, as a case example of one of the few industrialised nations which retains a heavily regulated labour market, to examine the role of state regulation in the protection of young people in precarious employment. Given the numerical dominance of young workers in the retail industry, our specific focus is on retail. We draw on empirical data from a decade of our own research into young people and work and the retail industry to argue that the state can, and should, act to mediate the effects of employers' labour use strategies in this industry.

References

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Roberts, Ken. (2009) *Youth in Transition: Eastern Europe and the West*, Basingstoke, Palgrave.